

THE PARADOX OF PERFECTION: HOW AI'S GRAMMATICAL PRECISION MASKS SOCIOPRAGMATIC FAILURES IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Summary

This article examines how the structural impeccability of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) serves as a cognitive trap within the paradigm of second language acquisition. The authors argue that the syntactic-lexical precision of large language models masks profound sociopragmatic deficiencies, fostering a “fluency illusion” that precipitates the atrophy of metapragmatic judgment. Central to this study is the “paradox of perfection,” a phenomenon in which AI’s flawless syntax creates a profound halo effect, neutralizing a learner’s ability to recognize sociocultural inappropriateness.

The research analyzes the risks of erosion of pragmatic sensitivity among students using AI for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition. It contends that over-reliance on algorithmically perfected outputs facilitates a state of “hidden pragmatic incompetence”. This condition is characterized by a high level of formal literacy paired with an inability to make independent sociopragmatic choices in real-world interactions. To mitigate these risks, the study proposes a fundamental shift in pedagogical focus: from utilizing AI as an authoritative source to employing it as an object of pragmatic deconstruction. The authors outline specific methodological strategies, such as contextual prompting and metapragmatic reflection, to restore human communicative authenticity in the digital age.

Key words: linguistic perfection, sociopragmatic deficiencies, sociocultural inappropriateness, pragmatic sensitivity, EFL, generative AI.

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1. Introduction

The accelerated adoption of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) into linguodidactics has introduced the challenge known as the “paradox of perfection”. This phenomenon stems from the ability of large language models to generate texts with impeccable grammatical, syntactic, and lexical accuracy, which, however, serves as a kind of linguistic screen concealing the algorithms’ inability to master subtle sociopragmatic nuances.

Within the framework of English as a foreign language (EFL) acquisition, this paradox becomes particularly critical, evolving into a serious cognitive barrier. The flawless linguistic form demonstrated by AI becomes a false benchmark for students, creating the risk of fostering

an illusion of language proficiency. Relying on the high linguistic quality of AI-generated responses, students mistakenly perceive them as absolute models to be imitated in real-life situations. However, the algorithmic model is incapable of comprehending extra-linguistic context, such as the social status of interlocutors, cultural nuances, or the hidden meaning of an utterance. Consequently, the pragmatic parameters of speech, without which successful intercultural interaction is impossible, remain overlooked.

In the context of Ukrainian higher education, where students face cognitive exhaustion due to prolonged wartime trauma, there is a growing tendency to use AI as a compensatory tool. Although this dependency reduces foreign language classroom anxiety, it unintentionally masks deep pragmatic failure, leading to superficial language proficiency that proves inadequate in high-stakes social and professional interactions.

Therefore, contemporary foreign language pedagogy requires a paradigm shift: from the mere instruction of grammatical structures to cultivating critical sociopragmatic awareness. This shift will empower students to identify the boundary between machine perfection and human communicative authenticity.

The aim of this study is to theoretically substantiate the phenomenon of the “paradox of perfection”; to analyze the disparity between linguistic form and sociopragmatic content in AI-generated texts; to identify their shortcomings and outline the risks of hidden pragmatic incompetence among EFL students; and to formulate strategies for adapting foreign language pedagogy with an emphasis on the development of critical sociopragmatic awareness.

2. A review of theoretical and practical risks

The “paradox of perfection” is rooted in the contradiction between the flawless linguistic competence of AI and its limited capacity for sociopragmatic adaptation. The theoretical justification of this disparity can be traced through the works of several research groups.

The foundation for understanding how form masks the absence of meaning was laid by Bender et al. in their concept of “stochastic parrots” (Bender, Gebru, McMillan-Major & Shmitchell 2021). The authors argue that AI skillfully manipulates linguistic form without possessing actual access to meaning or sociocultural experience. This view is echoed by Bohré, who notes that the excessive syntactic gloss of machine-generated text creates a false impression of intellectual and pragmatic depth for the user (Bohré, 2024).

A critical view of this phenomenon is offered by Chomsky et al., who highlight the grammatical excessiveness of AI. They argue that the flawless syntactic structure of algorithms is devoid of human understanding of morality and context which is a key component of socio-pragmatics (Chomsky, Roberts & Watumull, 2023).

The classic distinction between levels of pragmatic failures proposed by Thomas allows us to clearly localize the problem of AI, while pragmalinguistic failure (errors in the selection of linguistic forms) is virtually non-existent in modern models, sociopragmatic failure (misunderstanding of social context) remains their primary vulnerability (Thomas, 1983). Kasper further reinforces this analysis with interlanguage studies, explaining why even with perfect grammar, speech can sound pragmatically inappropriate (Kasper, 1992).

Within the Ukrainian scientific tradition, these issues are examined through the lens of communicative deviations and pragmatic failures. The fundamental works of Batsevych explain why “correct” linguistic forms fail in live communication: AI ignores the background knowledge of the audience, inevitably leading to communicative discomfort (Batsevych, 2004).

Shvachko emphasizes that such a “paradox” often arises in automated translation where the text remains grammatically perfect but culturally decontextualized (*Shvachko, 2022*).

The impact of AI on learners’ pragmatic sensitivity is analyzed by Belnap and Jarvis, who warn against a decline in students’ ability to distinguish subtle contextual nuances (Belnap & Jarvis 2023). Taguchi (2023) focuses on the threat to a student’s “pragmatic identity” using impersonal AI templates (*Taguchi, 2023*).

Sharples explores the methodological aspects of this problem, pointing to a loss of critical thinking among students using AI for writing (*Sharples, 2023*). From the perspective of Ukrainian pedagogy, Tarnopolsky emphasizes the importance of immersion in real-world contexts which AI can only superficially imitate (*Tarnopolsky, 2023*). To mitigate these challenges, the development of pragmatic competence in future teachers is thoroughly elaborated by Shapran who advocates for professional training that prioritizes sociopragmatic awareness as a safeguard against AI-driven linguistic superficiality (*Shapran, 2023*).

3. A typology of sociopragmatic failures in AI-generated discourse and their impact on EFL learners

An examination of the impact of artificial intelligence on contemporary language education requires, first and foremost, a terminological clarification of the key challenge, which we define as the “paradox of perfection”.

By the AI perfection paradox, we mean a specific cognitive-communicative contradiction characterized by a pronounced gap between the flawless linguistic form of the generated text (its grammatical, syntactic, and lexical precision) and its low sociopragmatic validity (inconsistency with situational context, the speaker’s illocutionary intentions, and ethnocultural norms of communication).

This phenomenon is based on the ability of large language models to create an illusion of high communicative competence through the mechanical proficiency of the linguistic code. However, as E. Bender and T. Gebru point out in their concept of “stochastic parrots”, such “perfection” is merely a manifestation of statistical symbol prediction rather than a reflection of social relationships (Bender, Gebru, McMillan-Major & Shmitchell 2021).

Within the scope of our study, we contend that this formal flawlessness becomes a trap for students learning English as a foreign language. By perceiving the grammatical correctness of AI as automatic confirmation of sociopragmatic appropriateness, students risk developing hidden pragmatic incompetence – a state in which the speaker possesses the linguistic tools but is unable to use them effectively to achieve communicative goals in a natural social environment.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, grammatical impeccability creates a profound “halo effect”: a positive impression of the external linguistic form is automatically transferred to the pragmatic content thereby neutralizing the student’s ability to recognize the sociocultural inappropriateness of an utterance.

For a deeper understanding of the “paradox of perfection”, it is necessary to classify the specific forms of sociopragmatic failure that are most frequently generated by generative AI algorithms. Despite their grammatical precision, the following deficiencies are clearly observable in machine-generated texts.

- Register mismatch is one of the most prevalent deficiencies, arising from the stylistic averaging inherent in large language models. AI frequently generates texts in an overly formal or academic register in situations where the social context requires an informal or neutral style.

As a result, the use of complex syntactic structures and bookish vocabulary in everyday communication creates a “robotic” effect and disrupts interpersonal distance.

- Pragmatic hypercorrection and violation of politeness strategies. AI algorithms are programmed with a pervasive over-politeness or formulaic sycophancy that feels unnatural in neutral social contexts. Based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness, it can be argued that AI often ignores the “positive face” of the interlocutor, choosing a strategy of excessive formal distance, which in real communication can be perceived as irony or passive aggression (*Brown & Levinson, 1987*).

- Contextual and presuppositional “deafness.” According to F. Batsevych’s concept, successful communication relies on shared background knowledge and presuppositions. Existing outside the boundaries of real physical and social reality, AI is unable to consider the shared experience of the participants in the dialogue. As a result, the algorithm may provide exhaustive explanations for obvious concepts (the phenomenon of “AI-mansplaining”) or ignore implicit meanings, making the text inappropriate for a specific situation.

- Ethnocultural insensitivity and loss of pragmatic force. AI often neutralizes cultural connotations, offering grammatically correct but culturally sterile text. This leads to a weakening of the utterance’s pragmatic force: for instance, a request generated by AI may be so obscured due to polite clichés that the recipient fails to recognize it as a call to action.

The shift from analyzing AI shortcomings to examining their impact on learners allows us to identify the most critical consequence of the “paradox of perfection”: the atrophy of the student’s own judgment. The use of generative models in EFL learning transforms the development of pragmatic competence, creating conditions for the emergence of hidden pragmatic incompetence. We characterize this condition a specific form of linguistic deviation in which the student demonstrates a high level of formal literacy but at the same time loses the ability to make independent sociopragmatic choices.

The genesis of this deviation is driven by a series of cognitive and methodological factors that arise from the human-algorithm interaction. Specifically, we identify the following key mechanisms of the negative impact of AI on student competence:

1. Atrophy of metapragmatic consciousness. Relying on AI as an ideal proofreader, the student delegates the function of pragmatic decision-making (choice of tone, politeness strategy, degree of directness) to the algorithm.

2. Risk of pragmatic fossilization. The grammatical impeccability of AI-generated text creates an illusion of complete adequacy. Students cease to notice the contextual insensitivity of the algorithm, accepting template responses as a sociocultural standard.

3. Loss of pragmatic identity. According to Naoko Taguchi’s concepts, the development of pragmatic competence involves forming an individual “voice” in a target language. AI offers an averaged, depersonalized discourse. By using it, students unwittingly adopt the role of a “digital avatar”, losing the ability to express personal intention, irony, or subjective attitude which are at the core of authentic human interaction.

4. The nature of hidden incompetence. A traditional pragmatic mistake made by a student (e.g., an overly direct request) is obvious to the teacher and can be corrected. In contrast, AI-generated text looks “too good” to arouse suspicion. Hidden incompetence is masked by a high level of language proficiency, yet it is abruptly exposed in real-life, face-to-face dialogue where the student, deprived of algorithmic support, lacks the necessary skills of sociopragmatic adaptation.

Therefore, awareness of the risks of the “paradox of perfection” requires not the prohibition of AI tools, but a fundamental shift in pedagogical focus: from teaching grammatical correctness to cultivating critical sociopragmatic awareness. This involves repositioning AI from

an authoritative source into an object of critical analysis. Thus, such a transformation of the role of technology within the educational process requires a comprehensive revision of the traditional system of exercises and the introduction of tasks that stimulate metapragmatic reflection.

4. Practical approaches to developing sociopragmatic awareness

Accordingly, we identify the following methodological strategies and task typologies:

- Pragmatic deconstruction and reverse editing. Instead of using AI solely to correct their own mistakes, students are given the task to analyse AI-generated texts.

Task: Analyse an email request created by a chatbot and identify where its “perfect politeness” becomes inappropriate (e.g., too formal for a colleague). Students must recontextualize the text by adding contextual authenticity.

- Contextual prompting. Developing the ability to manipulate social parameters in dialogue with AI.

Task: Generate three versions of the same message (e.g., declining a meeting) by altering only one parameter in the prompt: the status of the interlocutor or the degree of urgency. Students must compare the results and justify why AI versions often appear identical despite divergent social conditions.

- Sociopragmatic failure analysis. Use cases where AI ignores cultural context or idiomaticity.

Task: Students are provided with a dialogue where AI has failed to grasp irony or an underlying hint. The task is to identify the violation of Grice’s maxims and rewrite the response so that it aligns with the illocutionary intent of a real person.

- Metapragmatic reflection. Implementing mandatory commentaries for assignments written with the help of AI.

Task: Students must not simply submit a text but also provide a written explanation of why they chose a specific AI-generated option/response, what sociopragmatic risks they perceive in that text, and what changes they made to adapt it for a specific audience.

5. Conclusions

To sum up, the accelerated integration of generative AI into linguodidactics necessitates a paradigmatic shift toward mitigating the “paradox of perfection”, ensuring that technological flawlessness does not undermine the organic process of language acquisition. The development of critical sociopragmatic awareness empowers learners to escape the trap of “hidden incompetence”. Implementing strategies grounded in constructivist pedagogy and the theory of pragmatic consciousness transforms AI into a powerful tool for developing metacognitive skills. Consequently, foreign language learning shifts from the narrow dimension of formal grammatical accuracy to the complex realm of sociopragmatic appropriateness, where the human speaker remains the sole agent capable of authentic sociocultural mediation within the ever-changing extralinguistic reality.

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